



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Malcolm Andrews, 'A Picturesque Template:
The Tourists and their Guidebooks',
The Picturesque in Late Georgian England,
Georgian Group Symposium, 1994,
pp. 3-9 + 67

A Picturesque Template: The Tourists and their Guidebooks

Malcolm Andrews

I am going to start in the summer of 1770. The Revd William Gilpin is preparing to make his river tour of the Wye Valley. He arrives at Ross-on-Wye and there plans his journey down-river to Monmouth in a covered boat rowed by three men. Before embarking he considers the picturesque merits of Ross and its surrounding countryside:

‘The view from the church-yard is much celebrated. It is [very beautiful] amusing; but not picturesque; consisting of a [fine] elegant twist of the Wye, and an extensive country beyond it; but it [is broken into] contains no object [consists of too many parts to form a picture] of sufficient distinction; is broken up into too many parts; and is seen from too high a point for a picture . . .’¹

Scenic description has become a very complicated exercise here as Gilpin repositions his phrases and reselects from his quiverful of commendatory adjectives – beautiful, amusing, picturesque, fine, elegant. He is concerned to give a pictorially discriminating account of the face of the country: that indeed is the explicit purpose of his *Observations on the River Wye*:

‘The following little work proposes a new object of pursuit; that of not barely examining the face of a country; but of examining it by the rules of picturesque beauty: that of not merely describing; but of adapting the description of natural scenery to the principles of artificial landscape.’²

System has entered into the practice of scenic description, and that is the subject of my talk. Thirty-seven years after Gilpin’s Wye tour, Robert Southey wrote this:

‘Within the last thirty years a taste for the picturesque has sprung up; – and a course of summer travelling is now looked upon to be as essential as ever a course of spring physic was in old times. While one of the flocks of fashion migrates to the sea-coast, another flies off to the mountains of Wales, to the lakes in the northern provinces, or to Scotland; some to mineralogize, some to botanize, some to take views of the country, – all to study the picturesque, a new science for which a new language has been formed.’³

Southey’s light-hearted recognition of the new science and its new language is one kind of response. A more serious judgement comes from John Stoddart, the author of an 1801 travel book, as he reflects on the flood of Picturesque travel accounts over the past 15 years or so:

‘Whence comes it . . . that picturesque description is for the most part esteemed uninteresting? I believe it to be chiefly from the want of judgement in its execution. System is either followed too much, or too little.’⁴

System may give structure to an account, but that structure can also be very restricting: this is what I mean in referring to the template effect. For instance, when John Stoddart faces the prospect of climbing Ben Nevis, he ponders:

‘The exclusive systematizing spirit of the picturesque tourist, may, perhaps, condemn the toil of ascending such a height, which is repaid by no view, that is capable of artificial composition; but the man of nature and feeling rejoices in the noble sensations, which it affords.’⁵

The Picturesque is often felt as a kind of tyranny for tourists because it restricts the range of responses to grand scenery. A couple more examples should reinforce the point. A famously grand view was to be had from the battlements of Stirling Castle, but it was a view which Gilpin had pronounced as not Picturesque.

A later tourist expresses his impatience with this kind of judgement as he draws a distinction between the needs of 'the painter's eye' and other human needs:

'His [the painter's] business is to produce pleasure upon fixed principles. Grand conceptions of nature; surprise, admiration, elevation of mind; reflections upon art, cultivation and human power, and numberless sentiments and associations of ideas, will affect, and charm, a spectator on first surveying so glorious an horizon, which no rules of verbal description, drawn from the art of painting, could ever enable him to communicate to a reader.'⁶

The Picturesque template is the authoritative guide not just for the painter but for the writer too. Those 'rules of verbal description' bore down upon anyone attempting to describe fine scenic views.

I want to identify this new science and new language in a little more detail, by returning to Gilpin on his boat journey. Gilpin has laid down certain pictorial conventions about the nature of river scenery in his preamble; for instance, that it consists of 'four grand parts'. There is the 'area', which is the river surface. There are two side screens which are the opposing banks; and there is the 'front-screen', which we would call the background.

Four miles below Ross he comes to the ruins of Goodrich Castle, a scene which receives one of his highest accolades: 'This view, which is one of the grandest on the river, I should not scruple to call *correctly picturesque*; which is seldom the character of a purely natural scene'. This leads him to broaden into generalization:

'Nature is always great in design; but unequal in composition. She is an admirable colourist; and can harmonize her tints with infinite variety, and inimitable beauty: but is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole. Either the foreground, or the background, is disproportioned: or some awkward line runs across the piece: or a tree is ill-placed: or a bank is formal: or something, or other is not exactly what it should be.'⁷

Here, as so often in Gilpin, description modulates into prescription. An ideal landscape model is invoked and superimposed on the tourist's view and it is the tourist's – or the watercolourist's – task to adjust and edit the raw scenic data so that it conforms compositionally to the ideal model. What Gilpin calls 'the principles of picturesque beauty' derive from this ideal model.

There are two points to consider more closely here: the meaning of the notoriously indeterminate word Picturesque, and the nature of these ideal landscape models. The term Picturesque denotes that something is 'like a picture', 'after the manner of a picture'. It is unspecific about what categories of objects are to be included within the frame and it is unspecific about the formal ordering of those objects within the frame. Gilpin in 1768 explained it as 'a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture',⁸ but in that *Essay* he did not enlarge on what that peculiar kind of beauty is. Hardly more helpful is his remark 24 years later, when he defines the Picturesque as 'such objects as are proper subjects for painting'.⁹ But what makes some objects 'proper for painting'?

One answer would have been that certain categories of objects, pictorially structured in certain ways, have already been successfully portrayed by accomplished painters; and that they therefore have a kind of aesthetic authority. Because, for example, Claude habitually painted serene landscapes with classical temples, and used foreground trees as repoussoir devices, this might be seen as establishing a model of beauty of a Picturesque kind. The Picturesque has here a predominantly mimetic function: the template is a stereotyped Claudian model. To some extent this is Gilpin's Picturesque. Gilpin is very concerned with form and composition, in the proper proportioning of planes and recession, in variety of contour.

But Gilpin's formalist prescriptions will not do for the Picturesque as it developed a wider variety of connotations in the 1790s. For one thing, Gilpin's Picturesque assumed a measure of aesthetic consensus, whereby Claude's paintings would be granted unanimous acclaim as constituting the highest kind of pictorial beauty in landscape terms. Dutch landscapes throughout most of the eighteenth century, though increasingly popular, would have been relegated to a much lower position in the hierarchy of taste. This is clear from Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* to the Royal Academy students in the 1770s and 1780s. Reynolds assumed – or battled to retain – a consensus in taste. But he was working in a period which saw the collapse of consensus and the acknowledgement of the subjectivity of taste.

So this new aesthetic category, the Picturesque, as it passed from hand to hand, or from essay to essay, enjoyed a semantically protean existence. Each new theorist seized it and modified its meaning and frame of reference for his own purposes. Uvedale Price would have been content to detach it altogether from the practice of painting from which it etymologically derived: he applied it to a category of subjects which offered him visual pleasure and stimulus but which could not conventionally be accommodated in the category of either Beauty or the Sublime.

The Picturesque in Price's hands gives high aesthetic status to a range of subjects excluded from the traditional canon of beauty in rural scenery. That canon of beauty, in landscape terms, would have included the elegant palace, the Grecian temple, the improved garden scene, the velvety cornfield. These are beautiful; but not *picturesquely* beautiful according to the new aesthetic. Price's Picturesque subjects are just about the antitheses to such beautiful sights: the ruined tower, the Gothic arch, the weather-beaten cottage, the broken fence, the worn-out carthorse, the rough gipsy. Many of these are Gainsborough's familiar subjects; and in many respects Gainsborough is for Price what Claude was for Gilpin.

I mention this evolution of the range of meanings of 'Picturesque' in order to underline how unstable the term is. The authoritative writers on the Picturesque in the 1790s differed in their interpretation of it. Today it has become even vaguer in its referential usefulness. The best that can be said of it, perhaps, is that though it has no fixed denotative status, it still has extraordinary connotative power. However, the Picturesque I am chiefly concerned with in this paper is the Gilpin model. And it is on this basis that I want to examine the template effect now.

One might demonstrate this template effect in a number of ways. Let us take a few pictorial examples. A landscape by Claude offers a fairly standardized pictorial structure: repoussoir tree shading a darkened foreground; a brightly lit middle distance with a stretch of water and a building on a promontory; and a background of pale blue mountains. The whole landscape is usually bathed in a golden glow. A landscape by John Varley, from the early nineteenth century, reproduces the same tripartite structure, the same sinuously elegant treeforms and the same golden glow. It might be any graceful stretch of the Italian Campagna. The title, however, is *Landscape with Harlech Castle, and Snowdon in the Background*. Varley has Claudianised north Wales. The use of the foreground tree to frame the view or interrupt a middle-distance which was too smooth or regular in line became part of the Picturesque template. Gilpin introduces it frequently. An example may be given from his North Wales tour notebook of 1773. The writing on a sketch of Conway Castle explains what he has done to render the scene more Picturesque: 'a view of Conway Castle improved by planting a tree in the foreground, & breaking the regularity of the scene'.¹⁰ One more example may be given: 'Laugharne Castle', an aquatint from a painting by William Payne. (Fig. 1) It was published in R. H. Newell's guidebook, *Letters on the Scenery of Wales* (1821).

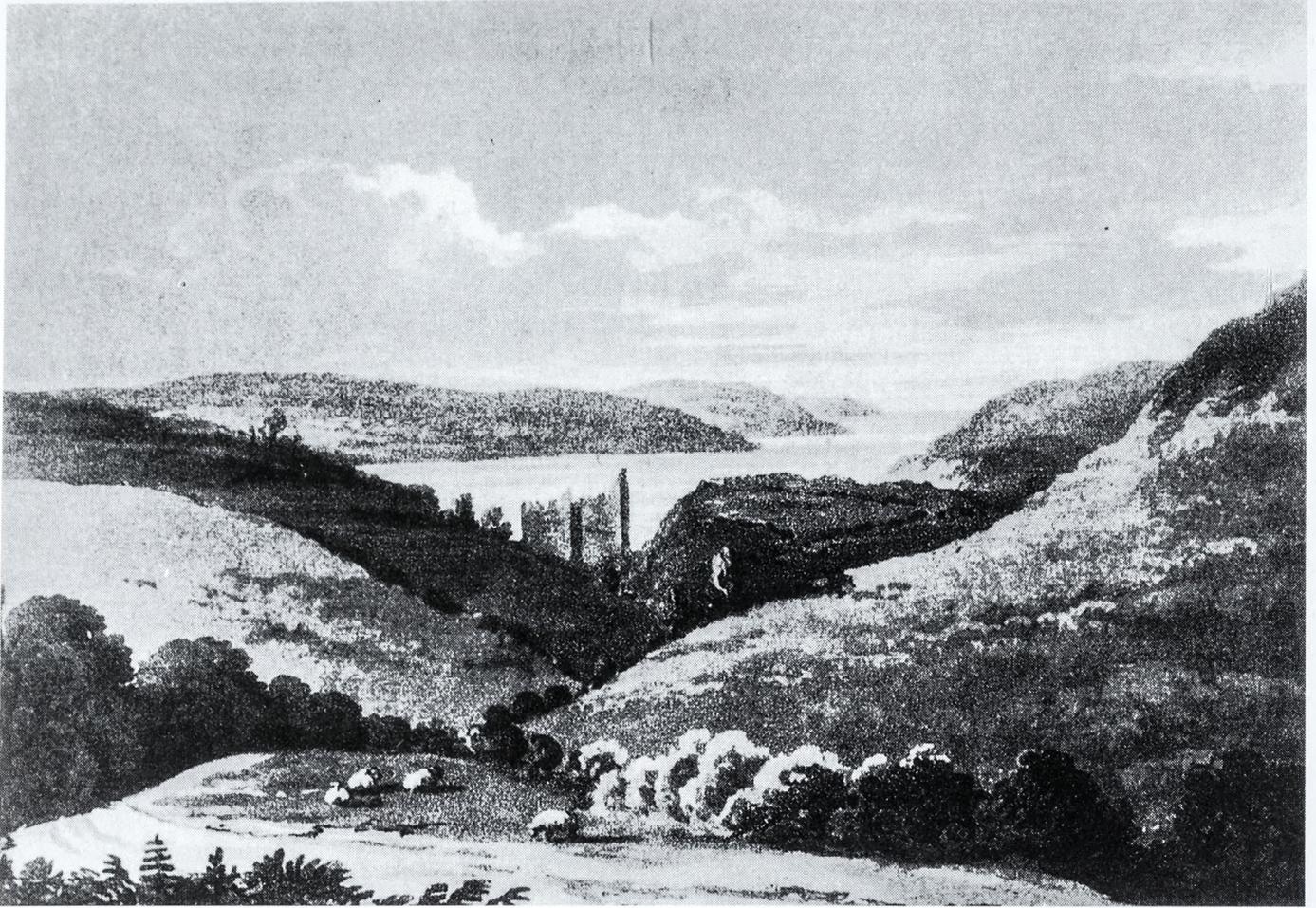


Fig. 1 Laugharne Castle. Aquatint from a painting by William Payne. 1821.

Newell's text, when he comes to describe the view, is highly fastidious about the need for the artist to find just the right viewpoint. I can't think of a better example of the manoeuvring involved in order to maximise the use of the template:

'Bring the Castle exactly *within the angle* made by the sloping hill and woody steep *before* it. Then ascend or descend, till the *water* and *three* of the promontories appear above the castle. In this station the sea bounds the distance, Nature's compositions are seldom complete or correct; but here nothing seems in the wrong place, and little which one would wish away. The only liberties necessary to be taken are, a tree or stump, planted at the *left* corner, and the uniformity of the long hedge on the right of the foreground somewhat broken.'¹¹

The composition thus achieved corresponds closely to the model of 'Picturesque Landscape' suggested by Gilpin in his illustration to his *Three Essays* of 1792. (Fig. 2)

This cavalier manipulation of scenery was one of the main targets for the satirists of the Picturesque. James Plumptre's *The Lakers: An Opera* (1798) has a scene on the banks of Derwentwater, at the famous viewpoint of Crow Park. It is a treeless area sloping down to the lake, so the artist has some problems with the conventionally Picturesque foreground. Veronica, the Picturesque enthusiast, laments to her companions: 'Oh! if one single tree had remained, this would have been an unparalleled spot'. So she has to improvise as she seizes her sketch-book: 'Sir Charles, pray come and stand by me for the trunk of an old tree in the foreground. And I beg, Mr Botanist, you and Lydia and Speedwell will form yourselves into a picturesque group. . .Your arm up, if you please Sir Charles, for the branch of the tree'.¹²

The tourist guidebook did not lag far behind in exploiting the new science. They were



Fig. 2 William Gilpin, *Picturesque Landscape*. Engraving. 1792.

often as fastidious as Veronica could have desired in directing tourists to the right viewpoints and encouraging a little artistic licence in taking the view. In other words they reinforce this template effect. Thomas West wrote *A Guide to the Lakes* in 1778, the main attraction of which was his selection and descriptions of specific viewpoints: 'This Guide will . . . be of use to the artists who may purpose to copy any of these views and landscapes, by directing his choice of station, and pointing out the principal objects'.¹³ Here is an example of his directions, in this case the viewpoint above the ferry terminal on the west bank of Windermere:

'Near the isthmus of the ferry point observe two small oak trees that inclose the road; these will guide you to this celebrated station. Behind the tree, on the western side, ascend to the top of the nearest rock, and from thence in two views command all the beauties of this magnificent lake. But, it will be more convenient to stop short of the two trees, and ascend the west side of the rock, for here the ascent is easier, and you open on the view at once. . . The trees are of singular use in answering the purposes of fore-ground and intersecting the lake.'¹⁴

West's *Guide* is one of the best examples of the template effect. In his directions and appraisals of scenery he accepts the authority of a number of distinguished earlier tourists to the Lakes – those who had left accounts of their tours, such as Arthur Young and Thomas Gray – just as he accepts the conventions of Picturesque taste in selecting and describing the 'stations'. This is perhaps the kind of thing any guidebook is required to do and it may be appropriate now to consider quite what service the Picturesque guidebook is supposed to perform.

Picturesque tourism is a controlled aesthetic experiment. The tourist is launched into a new environment far from home, exposed to strange and often intimidatingly huge landscape forms, made to feel insignificant by the scale of this landscape and alien in a relatively primitive culture. The Picturesque is a way of coming to terms with these new experiences, largely by imaginatively domesticating the wild, by reorganizing a shapeless,

infinitely expansive landscape into a sequence of frameable views. This mediating role seems to me one of the most interesting thrusts behind the whole vogue for the Picturesque, because, for all its folly and extravagant artificiality – the target of the satirists – it answers a basic human need: it familiarizes the unknown and introduces a sense of order in a disorientating situation.

We need to consider the cultural experience of late eighteenth-century tourism a little more here. Look again at those subjects which Gilpin emphatically pronounces as un-Picturesque: ‘from scenes indeed of the *picturesque kind* we exclude the appendages of tillage, and in general the works of men’.¹⁵ ‘The picturesque traveller’, he insists, ‘is . . . disgusted with the formal separations of property – with houses, and towns How flat and insipid is often the garden-scene! . . . the lawn and its boundaries, how unlike nature!’.¹⁶ The Picturesque tourist is in flight from scenes with which he has become too familiar and which he finds too cramping. ‘The first source of amusement to the picturesque traveller,’ says Gilpin, ‘is the *pursuit* of his object – the expectation of new scenes continually opening, and arising to his view. We suppose the country to have been unexplored’.¹⁷ Uncharted country is both exhilarating and intimidating, especially for the refined English southerners who were the main tourists in this period. And yet, in flight from the oppressive works of man and launched into uncharted wild countryside, the Picturesque tourist promptly begins to map the territory, to record specific stations, to bring the wilderness within the controlling compass of a series of frames. Nature was ‘fixed’, in the way we might now say the camera ‘caught’ a view. Here is Thomas Gray viewing Derwentwater in his Claude-Glass from one of his favourite stations:

‘[I] saw in my glass a picture, that if I could transmitt to you, & fix it in all the softness of its living colours, would fairly sell for a thousand pounds.’¹⁸

Paintings of these frameable views are turned into prints for mass distribution. Tour journal jottings are worked up into more formal travel accounts and eventually published as guidebooks for a hungry market. The guidebook is both a product of and an agent in reinforcing the template effect. It mediates the new. It protects the traveller from an excess of novelty, and from disorientation. It contextualizes the unknown, structures our responses to new places and relates what is unfamiliar to the network of known cultural experiences.

The Picturesque tourists preferred the mediated vision. They preferred to see landscape through pictures. They liked to match their preconceptions to the reality; and if the match didn’t work it was the reality that had to be adjusted. But scenic tourism can be made out to be too one-dimensional an experience. The template effect has stressed this, has stressed what that earlier critic called the ‘exclusive systematizing spirit’ of the Picturesque. This critic also suggested how limiting it was for ‘the man of nature and feeling’. The Picturesque was a particular response to the experience of new scenery. The point I have been trying to develop is that it was not just one of a number responses: it was often in direct conflict with other responses. In its habit always of invoking inherited canons of taste the Picturesque alienated those who valued the individual, subjective experience. Authority and authenticity face headlong collision. In distancing, formalising and commodifying natural scenery and ruined architecture, the Picturesque was antagonistic to those who wanted greater intimacy of engagement, greater fluidity of impression and a greater charge of emotional energy in the relationship with the natural world.

The last words should come from a writer who, for a while, was a Picturesque enthusiast but who later emphatically rejected what he describes as ‘a strong infection of the age’, for

precisely the reasons I have just outlined. This was William Wordsworth, in Book XI of *The Prelude*:

Oh! Soul of Nature! that does overflow
With passion and with life, what feeble men
Walk on this earth! how feeble have I been
When thou wert in thy strength! Nor this through stroke
Of human suffering, such as justifies
Remissness and inaptitude of mind,
But through presumption, and even in pleasure pleas'd
Unworthily, disliking here, and there,
Liking, by rules of mimic art transferr'd
To things above all art. But more, for this,
Although a strong infection of the age,
Was never much my habit, giving way
To a comparison of scene with scene
Bent overmuch on superficial things,
Pampering myself with meagre novelties
Of colour or proportion, to the moods
Of time or season, to the moral power
The affections, and the spirit of the place,
Less sensible.¹⁹

NOTES

A PICTURESQUE TEMPLATE

- 1 William Gilpin, 'Observations on the River Wye' (1770): MS notebook, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 2 William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye* (1782), p. 1.
- 3 Robert Southey, *Letters from England: by Don Manuel Espriella* (1807): reprinted in Malcolm Andrews ed., *The Picturesque: Literary Sources & Documents*, Helm Information, 1994, vol. 3, p. 82. A number of quotations will be drawn from this anthology, hereafter abbreviated to 'Andrews, *Picturesque*'.
- 4 John Stoddart, *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland* (1801), vol. 1, p. xii.
- 5 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 42–3.
- 6 John Lettice, *Letters on a Tour through various Parts of Scotland* (1794), p. 474.
- 7 William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, 1782, p. 18.
- 8 William Gilpin, *Essay on Prints* (1768), p. x.
- 9 Letter to Joshua Reynolds, 2 May 1791: reproduced in Gilpin, *Three Essays* (1792): Andrews, *Picturesque*, vol. 2, p. 19.
- 10 William Gilpin, 'Observations on . . . several parts of North Wales' (1773), MS notebook, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 11 R.H. Newell, *Letters on the Scenery of Wales*, 1821, p. 50.
- 12 James Plumptre, *The Lakers: An Opera* (1798): Andrews, *Picturesque*, vol. 3, p. 75.
- 13 Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes*, 1778: 2nd Ed. revised & enlarged, 1780: Andrews, *Picturesque*, vol. 1, p. 283.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- 15 William Gilpin, Dedication to *Three Essays*. 1792: Andrews, *Picturesque*, vol. 2, p. 6.
- 16 'On Picturesque Travel', *Three Essays* (1792): Andrews, *Picturesque*, vol. 2, p. 25.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 18 Letter to Thomas Wharton, November 1769: Andrews, *Picturesque*, vol. 1, p. 232.
- 19 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805–6, Book XI, ll. 146–64.
- 20 *Quarterly*, IX (1992), pp. 123–41; A.V. Griffiths, 'The Rogers Collection in the Cottonian Library, Plymouth', *Print Quarterly*, X (1993), pp. 19–36.
- 31 *Lettre sur la peinture, la sculpture, et l'architecture*, 2nd edn, Amsterdam 1749, pp. 136–7. La Gravure est aux beaux Arts, ce que l'Imprimerie est aux Sciences et aux Belles Lettres. Comme par l'une, les ouvrages de l'esprit circulent et se communiquent dans toutes les parties de l'Univers, de même par l'autre, les plus rares compositions de Peinture et de Sculpture se multiplient à l'infini, et tout le monde, par elle, peut jouir de ce dont un seul homme, sans elle, seroit unique possesseur.
- 41 For prints after Poussin see G. Wildenstein, 'Les graveurs de Poussin au XVII^e siècle', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, XLVI, 1955, pp. 81–371, G. Wildenstein, 'Catalogue des gravures de Poussin par Andresen', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, LX, 1962, pp. 139–202, and M. Davies and A. Blunt, 'Some Corrections and Additions to M. Wildenstein's "Graveurs de Poussin au XVII^e Siècle"', *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, LX, 1962, pp. 205–22. See also E. Waterhouse, 'Poussin et l'Angleterre jusqu'en 1744' in ed. A. Chastel, *Nicolas Poussin* (CNRS, Paris, 1960), I, pp. 283–95.
- 51 *Evening Post*, 18–21 March 1710; *Daily Post*, 3 May 1725.
- 61 See A. Griffiths, 'On some Albums of Etchings by Salvator Rosa', *Print Quarterly*, IX, 1992, p. 251. Some English prints after Rosa are described in J. Sunderland, 'The Legend and Influence of Salvator Rosa in England in the Eighteenth Century', *The Burlington Magazine*, CXV, 1973, pp. 785–9, and by Sunderland in M. Kitson *et al.*, *Salvator Rosa*, exh. cat., London, Hayward Gallery, 1973.
- 71 *The Daily Post*, 3 February 1724.
- 81 Boydell announced his acquisition of Goupy's plates in the *London Evening Post*, 18 January 1755. See *A Catalogue of Prints published by John Boydell*, 1773, pp. 46–8.
- 91 Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints*, 1768, p. 41; cf. Claude in M. Huber, *Notices Generales*, p. xiv 'les esqiffes décharnées des objets'.
- 101 On Pond's landscapes see L. Lippincott, *Selling Art in Georgian London: the Rise of Arthur Pond*, 1983, pp. 138–42.
- 111 These observations are based on the account of Claude in M. Huber, *Notices Générales*, 1787, and on the collection of prints after Claude in the British Museum.
- 121 See Anne French, *Gaspard Dughet called Gaspar Poussin 1615–75: a French landscape painter in*

THE PRINT AND THE SPREAD OF THE PICTURESQUE IDEAL

- 1 Roger de Piles, *The Art of Painting, and the Lives of the Painters, to which is added an Essay towards an English School*, transl. B. Buckeridge, 1706, pp. 54–65.
- 2 Few collections survive intact, but a good number can be partly reconstructed from sale catalogues. See T. Clayton, 'The Print Collection of George Clarke at Worcester College, Oxford', *Print*